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ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from a qualitative arts-based research project that took place in a fourth-grade classroom over the period of one school year. The article examines the impact of storytelling on children's self concept. In addition, it discusses how storytelling helped children process their social experiences in school. The study was grounded in the practice of storytelling and the narrative discourse of children. It explored children's responses to the character roles portrayed in traditional literatures and used methods influenced by qualitative and arts-based epistemologies. The study is influenced by research conducted by Stone (1998), Westland (1993), and Trousdale (1995) who compared children's attitudes to characters found in Grimm's fairy tales and is intended as a response to, and a deeper investigation of, traditional literatures' places in educational environments. (Contains 46 references.) (Author/BT)

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The Power of Storytelling: How Oral Narrative Influences Children's Relationships in Classrooms

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Abstract

This article presents findings from an arts-based research project that took place in a fourth-grade classroom over the period of one school year. It examines the impact of storytelling on children's self-concept. In addition, it discusses how storytelling helped children process their social experiences in school.

Storytelling & The Cultural Voice

The folk literature of the past, which was once consumed by adults, is now the standard fare of basal texts and children's literary classics. Today, despite our increasingly technologically literate society, traditional literature still holds a place in our culture. We know that the myths, legends, epics, and folk tales of prechirographic (Note 1) societies helped shape human experience; so it is not surprising to see that these same stories have found their way into the modern public discourse including our school classrooms. For example, stories such as the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are currently found in picture book form and have been translated into children's cartoons and animated feature. Even the popular television show "Hercules" as well as its spin off "Xena Warrior Princess" attests to the fact that epic themes and mythological characters from antiquity are currently part of the modern psyche, at the very least they are part of our entertainment industry.

Storytelling

Storytelling is one of the oldest, if not *the* oldest method of communicating ideas and images. Story performance honed our mythologies long before they were written and edited by scribes, poets, or scholars. Storytelling, as it is defined here, is a linguistic activity that is educative because it allows individuals to share their personal understanding with others, thereby creating negotiated transactions (Egan, 1995 & 1999). Without this interactive narrative experience humans could not express their knowledge or thought. As Bruner (1986) points out, storytelling is part of how humans translate their individual private experience of understanding into a public culturally negotiated form.

Storytelling is also a performance art, one that has been revitalized in recent years and which has developed into a neotradition throughout the U.S.A (Zipes, 1995). Today, the modern storyteller performs texts that (for most) have been learned from books.

However, the art of storytelling still remains connected to its ancient roots in that it remains an activity where a tale is told aloud, to an audience, without the use of memorized scripts or other literary texts. It is the closest thing we have, in modern contexts, to the orality of our preliterate ancestors. Modern storytellers, therefore, like their ancient counterparts, continue to rely on their manipulation of language in order to relate an anecdote and often make use of dramatic skills such as characterization, narration, vocalization, and mimetic action.

Traditional Literature

Traditional texts have been passed on through storytelling across the generations, developed by way of the folk process, and resulting in archetypal culturally shared narratives that have educative value. Literary forms of these tales, as we know them today, were originally collected (mostly by white male European Scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), transcribed, edited, published, and subsequently used as source material for much of the current literature for children as well as the fantasy fiction for adults. Still, due to the fact that many tellers crafted myths and legends in a variety of social contexts, over time, these stories remain illustrative of collective experiences. Many traditional texts define ethical perspectives, epistemological views, and cultural constructions of identities and it is generally thought that the folk process strengthened the collective or social knowledge, contained in stories. The evolution of folk tales, then, evolved into primary texts for learning and meaning making (Coles, 1989; Engle, 1995; Mishler, 1995).

The concept, that stories characterize and define identity, for both individuals and groups, is also grounded in the work of Jung (1969) who identifies a series of specific and formal elements within world mythologies that have become primary archetypes. Each archetype represents a core psychological function common to all humans. Jung's archetypes are found symbolically within traditional tales and are depicted in a variety of forms. The fact that many of these archetypes occur repetitively in myths from widely divergent geographical areas is evidence, according to Jung, that a "collective unconscious" exists connecting people, cultures, and time within a "generative force."

Bettelheim, a Freudian psychoanalyst, has also argued that stories are symbolic expressions of the inner experience of development in children (1977). Stories connect children to psychological realities and folk tales assist children in their psychosocial and imaginative growth. When traditional texts are told to children, according to Bettelheim, the symbolic patterns these tales display become manifestations of psychological constructs.

The work of Bettelheim (1977) and Jung (1969) profoundly influenced the field of education. Developmental models extracted from traditional literatures by these theorists suggested to many educators, at the time, that stories were important teaching tools and that children would benefit from exposure folk tales. Applebee (1978) and Favat (1977), in their originative studies, examined children's reactions to folk stories and found that students made connections between the plots and events in books by connecting their own life experiences to that of fictional characters. This research encouraged more educators to take stories seriously and to incorporate them in teaching and learning environments.

Storytelling and Learning

Wells's (1986) seminal study investigating the links between storytelling and school success found that the key to literacy development was consistent exposure to storytelling and narrative discourse in both the home and classroom environments. Wells' work has strengthened efforts to incorporate storytelling in school environments. Current studies support Well's findings, suggesting that telling stories from culturally diverse sources supports the creation of multicultural awareness in classrooms (McCabe, 1997) and encourages the development of healthy self-concepts (Paley, 1990). Traditional literatures from a wide variety of cultural contexts have also been found useful in the growth of imagination (Rosenblatt, 1976; Gallas, 1994), morality (Coles, 1989; Zipes, 1997) and self-identity (Chinen, 1996). In addition, Egan (1999) suggests that the dramatic format of Western story itself can function within classrooms as the primary form of teaching and learning. In addition, he finds that "the classic fairy tales have considerable power to engage the imaginations of young children in [classroom settings]" (p.35).

Although storytelling is now maturing into a recognized performance-art form, as indicated by the current popularity of storytellers' guilds, artist-residency programs, university courses, publications, and international conferences, it still takes a back seat to other more technological forms of instruction. In spite of the fact that storytelling as teaching has the strongest support in preschool and kindergarten classrooms—where it is an important accepted method of teaching—it is still not a common and consistent practice across grades and content areas. As Eisner (1998) points out, the mere presence and acceptance of arts-based practice does not presume that the arts have parity within schools, or a consistent place within classrooms. It has been over a decade since Egan (1989) urged teachers to see storytelling as a conceptual approach to curriculum. However, widespread integration of narrative pedagogy has not been created. Therefore, it is time, as Eisner (1998) suggests, to:

Widen our epistemologies [so that] the potential for rescuing curriculum from a hierarchy that reflects a more or less Platonic conception of knowledge and cognition increases... The privileged place of a limited array of fields of study in our schools would give way to a more ecumenical and broadly arrayed set of curricular options. (p. 107)

Unless we can now begin to readdress storytelling's place in the educational arena the performing-art of storytelling will continue to compete with media and computers as a system of instruction. It is likely too, that it will decline in schools as the prevailing emphasis on computer literacy, interactive technology, and distance learning programs increase—and as we come to rely on hypertexts and media productions as our primary source of information.

Investigating the Impact of Storytelling in Classrooms

Because children are currently the major consumers of traditional texts in our society, the question of how folk tales may or may not impact learning remains important to our understanding of education and human development. However, few studies exist that actually investigate the impact of the ancient and seminal performing art of storytelling on children's development and learning. With the exception of Egan's work (1989, 1995, 1997) in developing curricular formats based on story structures, Paley's (1990) pedagogical reflections on young children's dramatic play, and Atkinson's (1995 &

1998) life-story methodology examining how students perceive their life history, questions about the impact of storytelling in classrooms remain virtually unanswered.

In response to the paucity of research in this area, and because I am both a teacher and a storyteller, I conducted a qualitative arts-based study designed to examine children's responses to the storytelling of traditional texts. The intent of this study was to investigate how the art of storytelling impacted students' development and to look at what students might learn from folk tales after hearing them told aloud.

This study explored children's responses to the character roles portrayed in traditional and used methods influenced by qualitative and arts-based epistemologies (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Eisner, 1991 & 1998; Finley & Knowles, 1995). In addition, the study is influenced by research conducted by Stone (1998), Westland (1993), and Trousdale (1995) who compared children's attitudes to characters found in Grimms' fairy tales and is intended as a response to, and a deeper investigation of, traditional literatures' place in educational environments.

Methods

As a performance artist, scholar, and storyteller, I have become deeply interested, during the past twenty years, in examining what happens when stories come to school in their original format. Specifically, I am curious to know what impact, if any, traditional tales have on children's learning when they are presented in their oral form—as opposed to reading or retelling them from a book. This study was designed with these questions and assumptions in mind. It was grounded in the arts-process of performance-telling. Its major purpose was to investigate areas not accounted for in previous research by including multiple perspectives of children and by providing information about what elementary school students might say about storytelling and traditional texts as part of classroom practice.

Qualitative arts-based research includes the researcher and subject(s) in an iterative process based on participants' responses and reflections on the research question (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In this type of practice method evolves as data are collected, examined, and meanings are negotiated. Emergent theories are then brought back to the field and are used to modify concepts, protocols, and investigative practice. This study utilized such a process. For example, at the beginning of this study students discussed preferences and reacted to the qualities of characters in stories. As the study progressed, their reflections deepened and protocol questions were changed in order to better represent their thinking, reflectivity, and input. Stories and questions were presented to students, responses recorded, then questions, as well as analytical perspectives, were reworked and reinterpreted—dependent on student feedback. In addition, due to the iterative and grounded nature of this examination, the sample population was intentionally small so that the questions could be examined in-depth and over time. The goal of the study was to get the most holistic information possible from a small sample population so as to include participants in the exploration and development of the research.

This study was also grounded in the practice of storytelling and the narrative discourse of children, a traditionally powerless group in our society. It uses their stories as the primary data for making meaning out of the research encounter. In an attempt to break down some of the hierarchical and power relationships that are inherent in any relationship between adults and children, this investigation attempted to create a research setting that enabled students to creatively express their thoughts and viewpoints in a safe, respectful, and arts-infused environment. It was also designed to give students

an opportunity for expressing and exploring their own intuition and thinking.

Validity

Maxwell (1996) states that validity, in qualitative research, is both an issue of design and an issue of credibility, as it address the question of why findings should be believed. The validity standard that this study worked within is one of authentic relativism, in that it depended on the research design, employed art disciplines and procedures, fostered the research relationship as part of its methodology, and reflected participants' viewpoints in order to create an authentic account that is grounded in the reality of the event. Care was taken to capture a legitimate understanding of the study's context by presenting as complete a picture as possible of what participants and the researcher actually said, did, thought, created, and perceived.

Validity issues were also addressed as part of an epistemological grounding as well as method. For example, validity issues were deliberately structured into the research design and plan including; a) using methodology that correspond to the design with qualitative and arts-based approaches; b) including on-going collaborative approaches to discussion and investigation of research questions; c) paying attention to disconfirming and divergent data; d) collecting multiple data from multiple sources as a way of checking out researcher beliefs, assumptions, and biases; e) an on-going system of "memoing" (Creswell, 1998) on the part of the researcher.

Scope & Context

Because storytelling is a highly verbal and auditory art form, a small group (one Fourth-grade class) of students was selected as participants. The small size of the group allowed for in-depth discussions and analysis over a long period of time. It also enhanced the reflective nature of the responses.

The students involved were all regular attendees of Washington Intermediate School, a neighborhood facility located in a small New England mill town. All were between the ages ten through twelve, of working class, working poor, or welfare poor parents of Franco-American, Irish-American, Native American, or "Yankee" backgrounds.

Data collection, which took place over the course of one school year, focused on students' reactions to stories told aloud. Texts were selected from a wide variety of world tales from multicultural sources and included myths, folk and fairy tales, sections of epics, legends, and fables. In addition, stories were also selected for their ethical content. Stories included both conformist and nonconformist heroes and heroines, as well characters who portrayed vanity, foolishness, courage, housekeeping, magical abilities, care taking, and superhuman abilities.

Throughout the duration of this study (September-May), students were asked to participate in twice-monthly storytelling sessions executed by the researcher/storyteller (a guest-artist in the classroom). Storytelling time was usually scheduled during midmorning, after literacy and math instruction, and before recess. During presentations, chairs and desks were moved back and a rug was repositioned so students could lounge comfortably during the listening/telling.

In every case, students participated actively and with a high degree of interest; often requesting that a particular story be retold over and over again. After the storytelling, students met in small groups for in-depth interviews. Interviews and stories were taped and transcribed; these conversations and interactions made up the bulk of data used in the analysis. All of the data used here is quoted verbatim. No part of the transcribed text has been adjusted or changed to make it easier to read. However, the

data presented below have been preselected as indicative of the larger data set.

The Power of Storytelling

During interviews, students repeatedly discussed the plots of stories by relating them to their own life experience. Bruner (1990) calls this the creation of a "transactional relationship" between reality, memory, and imaginary/narrative worlds. Transactional connections help learners to what they know in order to contextualize what is unknown, thereby affording the learner, in this case the story-listener, with the power to control understanding and knowledge.

Findings show that students participated in this transactional relationship in many ways. For example, students often linked their life history to that of story characters by discussing the details and actions in stories with visual images that they had enjoyed through movies, video games, and television shows.

Larry: When I thought about the evil knights in this story I thought about this game I can play called war craft. It has this knight with these horns and you can click right on him and he moves or he doesn't move and he can say things.

They associated story images with familiar events and places in their own lives.

Brendan: I just imagined that this guy. I just pictured him with the hair (the King of Ireland's Thirteenth Son) and in the background I thought [about Lincoln]. I go to Lincoln State Park every year and I am at this campsite across from this well. And we walked in and we could see that over the water there was this big tree that had fell down and it fell down and that's what I pictured. Except I didn't picture a big tree I pictured a little trail that goes like that. And there would be all these rocks over here and the mountains over there and a bunch of things like that.

Thomas: When I heard about the fight (in *The King of Ireland's Thirteenth Son*) I thought about these stands and these people walking around saying 'peanuts, peanuts, get your peanuts.' And these guys all piled up in the fight.

They also made empathic connections to story characters by consistently using phrases such as; "if I were like him;" "If I were her," or; "that's just like me."

Matt: Yeah, I'd be like the thirteen son of the King of Ireland, yeah. Because, he got to use his sword, and a stick, and a sling shot, and a bow. And he got to do something I like to do too, clean house and gardening and stuff.

Kimberly: Tokyo stood up to the dragon and after that the dragon went to go after her and he roared and if I were her I'd be scared. I think she was scared and brave.

Peg: I liked the girl in the story because she always would look in the mirror at herself, like me because I'm always combing my hair and putting it up.

In this way, the storytelling experience was both educative and powerful because it

allowed students an opportunity of controlling their understanding through a comparison, or negotiation, of real and fantasy worlds.

James: Well in real life she would have died because she was gone for like a whole two or three years wasn't it? And how could she make money to get food? Because I don't think that she had that much food in her back pack unless she stopped and made some vegetables and took some vegetables and peanuts.

Developing A Storytelling Relationship

When students were asked what they thought about the experience of storytelling, all had positive responses. They liked the storytelling sessions because of their entertainment value ("it was fun") and because storytelling was "funny," "cool," and "really neat." Storytelling also helped to make information "interesting." For example, Kimberly felt that storytelling was "important because they come from so many different countries and stuff... that is what keeps them from being boring." Laura's opinion was that "the way stories were told" was more important than the content of the tales. She observed that "its got to be good telling to make it a good story, otherwise it's boring."

The fact that students focused on how the story was told, as opposed to the content of the stories themselves, was surprising since one of the assumptions underlying this study was the belief that it was the material, i.e. plots, characters, and motifs, that was most important to children. Students disagreed with this premise and felt, instead, that without the activity of telling, along with the interest and drama it evoked, the story content would have less value. The subsequent meaning gleaned from the roles, motifs, and archetypes of stories had more impact when told orally (as opposed to reading them from a book).

The most powerful part of the storytelling, according to students, was the "way it gets told" and the relationship that developed between the teller and listener.

Laura: I'd choose a storyteller coming in and telling, it's better in school, it's better than reading a book. Because you (the storyteller) can make it more funnier and you don't have to follow (read) the real story.

Missy: well I thought the storytelling was cool. It's the way you tell them with the voices and stuff.

Brendan: I've never heard so many stories! I barely even know any stories. If I took a chunk off my brain, a part that I knew would grow back and I took off that part that had all the stories I know it wouldn't even hardly be that big. But its been growing since you came and started to tell stories. Yes! ... Those hero stories and stuff, you make them seem like it is so funny and stuff. That's what I liked, how you make it funny. Hero stories are not supposed to be funny but I like them better when they are.

Storytelling, students agreed, created relationships between students and the story, between the story and life experience, and between the teller and the listener. Missy described this relationship as being "an ambassador." She observed that when stories were told aloud the teller was behaving like an ambassador because she was bringing stories from other cultures and other places to the school. A storyteller is like an

ambassador because the teller is a bridge builder, a person who broadens the discourse by describing images and messages from other worlds. A teller, like an ambassador, also creates détente.

Missy: Storytelling is being an ambassador, for me you are [an ambassador] 'cause you make people happy.

In addition, Steven observed that hearing stories encouraged him to talk and tell more stories.

Steven: the way you played her out (the witch in the story) was good. See, I think that is one of the key thing in storytelling—[it] is like acting out the characters well. I wouldn't do it so good.

Researcher: what is another key thing about storytelling?

Steven: You don't tell it the same way twice. And well you exaggerate sometimes. I think it would be better if [teachers would tell stories more] because it adds more fun into the day but it can raise conversation in class.

Researcher: is that bad?

Steven: Well, conversations during math and stuff. Conversations about the story while you are doing math and stuff, like playing a math game, and then you start to talk about the story instead of doing what you are supposed to do.

Storytelling & Learning about Identity

Data indicate that combining storytelling with post-performance discussions enhanced students' ability to clarify and examine their value systems. When students were presented with a variety of stories from disparate cultural texts, they began to examine their own biases and conceptions. For example, while storytelling allowed students to reflect on their own condition by hearing about life through the lens of story, students also had an opportunity to see their own lives more clearly and in some cases differently.

Matt: well he did battle to marry the princess, that was an awful lot of battling, I would have done that!! It's fun. I do it with my brothers and wrestling is fun. Sometimes, when they don't get hurt.

Jacob: I'd like to be that guy with the golden hair because I would have more strength.

Through the process of listening, consuming, and reflecting on stories, students clarified their own values and their own condition.

Stories and story discussions also provided descriptions of others unlike themselves.

Missy: Well[in the story] girls and women should be doing what they want I guess. They would do what they want... I think women should do anything they want.

Jacob: being adventurous is a boy thing. ...but the girl didn't run away (like

the boys in the story did), If girls get embarrassed or something usually they just stand there and go 'So?' Like me, I was jump roping and I lost my pants. I was definitely embarrassed. I ran away.

The stories also gave students a greater palette of images to choose from. Many students had a difficult time with the behavior of nontraditional heroes and heroines portrayed in some of the stories. Children struggled with the concepts of warrior women and housekeeping men. They had an especially hard time accepting the behavior of the princess Atalanta who defied her father by refusing to marry.

Walter: Well, its her choice to get married or not. And she should go by her own life and if she doesn't want to get married then it's her own fault. If she gets to be an old crippled lady and then she dies and there's nobody to rule the kingdom, then people could come over and attack and stuff. It would be her fault.

As this study progressed, however, and as more stories containing differing viewpoints were told, many of the children began to either challenge their own traditional and conformist ideas or to adjust their social consciousness.

Thomas: What is wrong with girls? What is wrong with them?

Researcher: What is wrong with them?

Thomas: Nothing, completely nothing.

Jacob: completely nothing wrong. Difference none.

Researcher: There is not difference?

Jacob: Only the personality. In the look there is a difference but...

Nathaniel: The rest of the body, like their muscles and their efforts and their work.

They began to talk about the "unfairness" of their social system.

Randy: Men have bigger bodies, that's the thing they were made for (to get beat up). God made them so they have a bigger body. Their bodies are [created] to get beat up but not women's bodies.

Thomas: That's not fair to the men or the women.

Jacob: That's what I can't understand.

Thomas: It's not fair to either of us, cause the men get all banged up but the women don't.

Some even commented on the relationship between difference and parity.

Jacob: Well there really isn't a difference from the men and women [in these stories] because they are both equals in some things. In some parts it could be either men or women. Like the one where they both killed the giants, so they are both kind of the same.

Researcher: Do you think you are going to change [who does the housework] when you have sons? What do you think those things will be?

Jacob: Washing and cleaning.

Researcher: So your sons will see you doing some housework?...

Thomas: It should change so easily—both men and women.

Researcher: So that it is more equal?

Jacob: No so they both can even things out between them.

Participation in this study caused some students to think more deeply about diversity and their own relationship to the social construction of identity.

Conclusions

The activity of storytelling along with the content of the stories told, had an impact on students' interpersonal relationships, empathy, and interest. Through stories and storytelling, children were exposed to long-standing archetypal models that engaged their imaginations. Storytelling stimulated sympathetic responses as well and caused students to think more deeply about their social world.

The telling of traditional texts in educational environments raised student consciousness and enriched the lives by engaging them in thinking critically and deeply about social issues. This enrichment, in turn, influenced their discourse and reflections—especially pertaining to issues of diversity and equity. As they participated in story-listening and post-telling discussions they began to identify cultural norms and standards and were able to explore their own lives through the lens of story. In addition, storytelling provided a model for students to create relationships between themselves and the teacher/researcher. Finally, storytelling provided an educative environment that helped children develop individual perspectives.

By participating in storytelling, the children in this study created transactional experiences that increased their knowledge of self and others. They did this by reflecting on images and conditions in stories and linking them to known cultural concepts and paradigms. Therefore, storytelling needs to be understood as a way of knowing, and as such, we need to recognize it for the valuable educative tool that it is.

By examining the content of stories along with the form in which the stories were communicated, students were given an opportunity to explore what Jackson (1995) calls the "epistemological function" of stories in schools. As he points out, "stories do not simply contain knowledge, they are themselves the knowledge we want students to possess" (p.5). In addition, when students in this study were exposed to a consistent diet of storytelling and when they were asked to explore the ways that these stories functioned they began to reflect on their own positions within society. This is what Egan (1997) defines as developing a "romantic understanding," or emotional perception, of story content. Students often spontaneously discussed their empathic responses after listening to stories. This was probably because, as Egan posits, stories and storytelling required them to actively engage in content by using both their emotional intelligence and their cognitive ability.

Egan (1997) sees the educative and creative value of stories as the primary function of narrative expression. For him storytelling is a generative activity that creates an integrated and "educated mind," one that is connected to both the logical and imaginative ways of knowing. He also suggests that stories, both in format and presentation, are essential pedagogical tools for teaching and learning.

Egan's assertions have merit (1997). Although the research reported here is limited in scope, findings indicate that storytelling enhanced the students' abilities to reflect and develop relationships between the texts, teller, and themselves. As a result, these relationships supported and amplified students' comprehension, listening, and interaction

with others.

Stories, in this instance, were also tools that linked participants to the social world of school. The fact that these students made connections to their own lives as well as relating empathetically with others after the storytelling experience indicates that participating as a listener of stories was an important act of negotiation and diplomacy. Students also used the storytelling event as an opportunity to connect and explore relationships. The act of telling, combined with the content of the stories themselves, became the link that connected the learner with both interpersonal and intrapersonal realms. Therefore, narratives are found to be seminally important to the learning and development of children.

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